

## LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED YOUTH ISSUES

**D**uring adolescence, young people form their sexual identity. This SIECUS Fact Sheet reviews research on sexual orientation during adolescence and presents the available statistics on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students. Many of the studies are regional or local. Much of the research focuses on samples of LGBT youth who are disproportionately at risk.

### SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

- Sexual self-concept is an individual's evaluation of his or her sexual feelings and actions<sup>1</sup>
- Developing a sexual self-concept is a key developmental task of adolescence<sup>2</sup>
- During adolescence, young people tend to experience their first adult erotic feelings, experiment with sexual behaviors, and develop a strong sense of their own gender identity and sexual orientation<sup>3</sup>
- Gender identification includes understanding that a person is male or female as well as understanding the roles, values, duties, and responsibilities of being a man or a woman<sup>4</sup>

### DURING ADOLESCENCE

These statistics are from a report written by the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State which describes several other studies:<sup>5</sup>

- In Seattle, of 8,406 respondents in the ninth to twelfth grades, 4.5 percent of respondents described themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB). Ninety-one percent described themselves as heterosexual. Another four percent indicated that they were "not sure" of their orientation.
- In Massachusetts, of 3,982 respondents in the ninth to twelfth grades, two percent of the students described themselves as GLB and three percent reported that they had had same-gender sexual experience.
- In Vermont, of 8,636 respondents in the ninth to twelfth grades, 5.3 percent of young men and 3.4 percent of young women reported having engaged in same-gender "sexual activity."
- In Minnesota, of 36,254 respondents in the seventh to twelfth grades, 1.1 percent of students described themselves as "bisexual," "mostly homosexual," or "100 percent homosexual." Same-gender sexual attraction and anticipated future same-gender sexual experience was

reported by 5.1 percent, and same-gender sexual fantasy was reported by 2.8 percent of respondents.

- Uncertainty about sexual orientation declined with age, from 25.9 percent of 12-year-old students to five percent of 17-year-old students.<sup>6</sup>
- In San Francisco, of 1,914 respondents in the ninth to twelfth grades, 0.2 percent of respondents reported same-gender sexual intercourse.
- Of 13,454 Native-American youth in the seventh to twelfth grades at reservation schools throughout the nation, 1.6 percent of students described themselves as "bisexual," "mostly homosexual," or "100 percent homosexual." Same-gender sexual experience was reported by 1.3 percent of respondents. Same-gender attraction and anticipated future same-gender sexual experience was reported by 4.4 percent and same-gender sexual fantasy by 4.4 percent of respondents.

A national survey of 1,752 college students found that:<sup>7</sup>

- Forty-eight percent of self-identified gay and bisexual college students became aware of their sexual preference in high school, while 26 percent found their true sexuality in college.
- Twenty percent of self-identified gay and bisexual men knew that they were gay or bisexual in junior high school, and 17 percent said they knew in grade school.
- Six percent of self-identified gay or bisexual women knew that they were gay or bisexual in junior high school, and 11 percent knew in grade school.

### SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

A study of 394 self-identified bisexual and homosexual adolescents in the seventh to twelfth grades who participated in the 1986-87 *Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found that:<sup>8</sup>

- 35.8 percent of younger girls ("younger" was defined as 14 years of age or younger) and 14.3 percent of younger boys reported having had any kind of sexual experience with a male.
- 45.2 percent of younger boys compared to 8.2 percent of younger girls reported sexual experience with a female.
- The majority of younger girls reported fantasizing about males, and the majority of younger boys reported fantasizing about females. However, 27.1 percent of

younger girls compared to 18.6 percent of younger boys reported fantasizing about both genders.

- 74.1 percent of older boys (“older” was defined as 15 years of age or older) and 26.9 percent of older girls reported sexual experience with a female.
- For older adolescents, half of the boys and girls reported fantasizing exclusively about the opposite gender, while 41.6 percent of older girls and 36.4 percent of older boys reported fantasizing about both genders.

A study of 3,816 public school students 12 to 19 years of age who participated in the *1987 Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found that:<sup>9</sup>

- Bisexual/lesbian respondents (33 percent) were as likely as their heterosexual peers (29 percent) to have ever had penile-vaginal intercourse, while those unsure of their sexual orientation (22 percent) were less likely to have engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse
- Of the respondents who had ever had penile-vaginal intercourse, 62 percent of bisexual/lesbian young women said they had first done so before the of age 14, as compared with 45 percent of heterosexual respondents and 46 percent of those unsure of their sexual orientation. However, this difference was no longer statistically significant when controlled for self-reported history of sexual abuse.
- Among sexually experienced respondents, bisexual/lesbian women were significantly more likely to engage daily or several times a week in penile-vaginal intercourse (22 percent) than their heterosexual peers (15 percent) or those unsure of their sexual orientation (17 percent).

A study of ninth to twelfth grade public high school students in the *1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* found:<sup>10</sup>

- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientation was associated with having had sexual intercourse before 13 years of age.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientation was associated with having sexual intercourse with four or more partners both in a lifetime and in the past three months.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientation was associated with having experienced sexual contact against one’s will.

### CONTRACEPTIVE USE

A study of 3,816 public school students 12 to 19 years of age who participated in the *1987 Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found that:<sup>11</sup>

- Among sexually experienced respondents, 44 percent of those unsure of their sexual orientation reported no use of contraception as compared with 30 percent of bisexual/lesbian respondents and 23 percent of heterosexual respondents.

- Of the respondents who used any contraceptive method, 12 percent of bisexual/lesbian respondents, 15 percent of heterosexual respondents, and nine percent of those unsure of their sexual orientation used unreliable methods (such as withdrawal or rhythm).

### HIV RISK

- A study of 2,621 gay and bisexual men 15 to 25 years of age in 10 U.S. cities found that more than one fifth (22 percent) of young gay or bisexual men had never tested for HIV and over half had not tested in the six months prior to the study. This study also found that these men were more likely to test if they knew of a place where they felt “comfortable” and if they had exposure to information from a variety of prevention sources such as flyers or workshops.<sup>12</sup>
- A study of 3,492 gay and bisexual men, 15 to 22 years of age in seven U.S. cities found that one in six young men who had sexual intercourse with men had recently had sexual intercourse with women. In addition, nearly one fourth of these men reported recently having had unprotected sexual intercourse with both men and women. The study confirms that young bisexual men are a “bridge” for HIV transmission to women, particularly since 6.6 percent of the bisexual men in the study were HIV positive.<sup>13</sup>

### PREGNANCY

A study of 3,816 public school students 12 to 19 years of age who participated in the *1987 Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found that:<sup>14</sup>

- Bisexual/lesbian respondents reported approximately twice as great a prevalence of pregnancy (12 percent) as either unsure or heterosexual young women (five to six percent).
- Among respondents who had been pregnant, 24 percent of bisexual/lesbian respondents reported multiple pregnancies as opposed to 10 percent of heterosexual respondents and 15 percent of those unsure about their sexual orientation.

### HARASSMENT AND SAFETY

A national survey of 496 LGBTQ students under 19 years of age who were affiliated with local youth service organizations found that:<sup>15</sup>

- Two out of five youth (41.7 percent) did not feel safe in their schools because they are LGBTQ.
- 86.7 percent of LGBTQ youth who felt safe in their schools still reported sometimes or frequently hearing homophobic remarks.
- Despite reporting feeling safe, 46 percent of LGBTQ youth

reported verbal harassment, 36.4 percent reported sexual harassment, 12.1 percent reported physical harassment, and 6.1 percent reported physical assault in their schools.

- 91.4 percent of LGBTQ youth reported that they sometimes or frequently hear homophobic remarks in their schools (words such as “faggot,” “dyke,” or “queer”).
- 99.4 percent of LGBTQ youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from other students (n=481)
- Over one third (36.6 percent) of LGBTQ youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or school staff.
- Over one-third (39.2 percent, n=184) of LGBTQ youth reported that no one ever intervened when homophobic remarks were heard. Almost half (46.5 percent) reported that someone intervened only some of the time. Other students were more often reported to intervene (82.4 percent) than were faculty (66.5 percent).
- 38.2 percent of youth did not feel comfortable speaking to school staff about LGBTQ issues.
- 47.7 percent of youth from the Midwest, 41.7 percent of youth from the Northeast, 31.6 percent of youth from the South, and 29.4 percent of youth from the West reported being uncomfortable talking to any school staff member about LGBTQ.
- 69 percent of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence.
- 61.1 percent of LGBTQ youth reported experiences of verbal harassment, with 45.9 percent having experienced it daily 46.5 percent reported experiences of sexual harassment; 27.6 percent reported experiences of physical harassment; and 13.7 percent reported experiences of physical assault
- 73.7 percent of transgender youth reported hearing homophobic remarks “sometimes” or “frequently”
- 94 percent of white youth, 85.7 percent of African-American/black youth, 80.6 percent of Latino(a) youth, and 93.8 percent of Asian-Pacific Islander youth reported hearing homophobic remarks “sometimes” or “frequently.”
- 98.3 percent of youth from the Midwest, 92.3 percent of youth from the South, 89.4 percent of youth from the West, and 86.4 percent of youth from the Northeast reported hearing homophobic remarks “sometimes” or “frequently”
- 40 percent of Latino(a) youth, 29.6 percent of White youth, 18.8 percent of Asian-Pacific Islander youth, and 13.4 percent of African-American/black youth reported being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 40.4 percent of youth from the Midwest, 30.2 percent of youth from the West, 21.8 percent of youth from the

Northeast, and 17.1 percent of youth from the South reported being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation and gender identity

A study of ninth- to twelfth-grade public high school students in the *1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* found that:<sup>16</sup>

- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were more than four times as likely to report being threatened with a weapon on school property.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were almost five times as likely to report failing to attend school because of their fears about safety.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were more likely to carry a weapon in the 30 days prior to the survey.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were more likely to have engaged in a physical fight in the 12 months prior to the survey.

A study of 3,816 public school students 12 to 19 years of age who participated in the *1987 Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found:<sup>17</sup>

- Bisexual/lesbian respondents were more likely to report physical abuse (19 percent) than heterosexual adolescents (12 percent) and those unsure of their sexual orientation (11 percent).
- Twenty-two percent of bisexual/lesbian respondents reported a past history of sexual abuse versus 15 percent of heterosexual respondents and 13 percent of those unsure of their sexual orientation.

A study in the New York juvenile justice system estimates that anywhere from four to 10 percent of the juvenile delinquent population identify as LGBTQ.<sup>18</sup>

## SEXUAL ABUSE

A study of 394 self-identified bisexual and homosexual adolescents in the seventh to twelfth grades who participated in the *1986–87 Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey* found that:<sup>19</sup>

- The proportion of younger respondents (defined as 14 years of age or younger) with a history of sexual abuse was almost four times greater among girls (14.9 percent) than boys (4.1 percent).
- None of the younger boys and 42.1 percent of the younger girls who reported a history of sexual abuse discussed the abuse with someone.
- 30.7 percent of older girls (defined as 15 years of age or older) compared to 16.7 percent of older boys reported a history of sexual abuse.
- 54.5 percent of older boys and 45.8 percent of older girls who reported a history of sexual abuse had never discussed the abuse with anyone.

## SUICIDE

A study of ninth- to twelfth-grade public high school students in the *1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* found that:<sup>20</sup>

- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were more than three times as likely to have attempted suicide in the past 12 months. A Massachusetts Department of Public Health study found that:<sup>21</sup>
- Of 4,000 Massachusetts high school students, approximately 40 percent of gay and bisexual students had attempted suicide compared with approximately 10 percent of their heterosexual peers.

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

A study of public high school students in the ninth to twelfth grades in the *1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* found that:<sup>22</sup>

- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientation was associated with an increased lifetime frequency of use of cocaine, crack, anabolic steroids, inhalants, “illegal,” and injectable drugs.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were more likely to report having used tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine before 13 years of age.

## SCHOOL PERSONNEL

- In a random sample of high school health teachers, one in five surveyed said that students in their classes often used abusive language when describing homosexuals.<sup>23</sup>
- A national study of secondary school counselors’ perceptions of adolescent homosexuals found that 25 percent perceived that teachers exhibited significant prejudice toward homosexual students and that 41 percent believed that schools were not doing enough to help gay and lesbian students adjust to their school environments.<sup>24</sup>
- In a random sample of high school health teachers, one third perceived the schools were not doing enough to help homosexual adolescents.<sup>25</sup>
- In a study of gay and lesbian adolescents 14 to 21 years of age, 23 percent of females and 25 percent of males reported that they were able to talk with their school counselors about their sexual orientation.<sup>26</sup>

## SUPPORT FOR LGBT YOUTH

A 1988 national survey of heterosexual male youths 15 to 19 years of age found that only 12 percent felt that they could have a gay person as a friend.<sup>27</sup> In a 14-city survey, nearly three-fourths of lesbian and gay youth first disclosed their sexual identity to friends; forty-six percent lost a friend after coming out to her or him.<sup>28</sup> In a study of gay and lesbian adolescents 14 to 21 years of age, fewer than one in five of the surveyed gay and lesbian adolescent students

could identify someone who was very supportive of them.<sup>29</sup>

## STUDENT ATTITUDES

A national survey of 2,804 American high school students 16 to 18 years of age with an “A” or “B” grade average found that:<sup>30</sup>

- Nearly 40 percent say that they are prejudiced against homosexuals.
- Nearly four out of five (78 percent) feel homosexuals should be permitted to enlist in the military.
- Three out of four (74 percent) feel gays should be allowed to teach school.
- More than three out of five high-achieving teens (62 percent) believe it is okay to have a gay Girl or Boy Scout Leader.
- Two out of three (68 percent) believe gays should be able to coach youth sports.
- More than half believe gay males and lesbians should be allowed to marry (54 percent) and to join the clergy (54 percent).

## PARENTAL SUPPORT

A national survey of 1,000 American parents found that:<sup>31</sup>

- Seventy-six percent of parents nationwide would be comfortable talking to their children about issues related to homosexuality or gay and lesbian people.
- Sixty-seven percent of parents nationwide favor teaching children that gay people are just like other people.
- Sixty-two percent of parents nationwide would be comfortable talking to their children’s teachers about issues related to homosexuality or gay and lesbian people.
- Sixty-one percent of parents nationwide said that homosexuality is “something I would discuss with my children if they asked me questions, but not something I would raise with them on my own.”
- Fifty-six percent of parents nationwide favor allowing groups or clubs on school campuses to promote tolerance and prevent discrimination against gay and lesbian students.
- Fifty-five percent of parents nationwide would be comfortable if their children’s teachers were gay or lesbian.
- Fifty-five percent of parents nationwide favor allowing openly gay teachers to teach in middle schools and high schools.
- Fifty-four percent of parents nationwide would be comfortable if their children’s friends were gay or lesbian
- When asked, “What is the youngest age you feel you might need to talk to your children about homosexuality?,” the following responses were given:

Under five years of age—two percent



Five to six years of age—eight percent  
 Seven to eight years of age—eight percent  
 Eight to nine years of age—11 percent  
 Nine to 10 years of age—21 percent  
 11 to 12 years of age—20 percent  
 13 to 14 years of age—14 percent  
 15 to 16 years of age—four percent  
 17 to 18 years of age—one percent  
 Over 18 years of age—two percent  
 Do not know—10 percent

## TEACHING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

- Forty-six percent of a random sample of high school health teachers formally taught about homosexuality. Among those teachers, 48 percent spent less than one class period teaching about homosexuality.<sup>32</sup>
- Thirty-seven percent of high school health teachers reported that they would feel very comfortable teaching about homosexuality, while 20 percent believed that they also would be very competent at teaching the topic.<sup>33</sup>
- Sixty-six percent of high school health teachers identified mass media as the most commonly used source of information regarding homosexuality.<sup>34</sup>
- In a self-reported study, sixty-two percent of health and education professionals stated that they needed to update their knowledge or skills to discuss or teach homosexuality and bisexuality.<sup>35</sup>
- In one study of gay and lesbian adolescents 14 to 21 years of age, half of the students said that homosexuality had been discussed in their classes. Of those, 50 percent of females and 37 percent of males said it was handled negatively.<sup>36</sup>

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